

Integrating Habitat Concerns in the Fishery Management Process

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Opportunities to address aquatic habitat restoration, conservation and preservation issues are numerous within the present fishery management process of the eastern and southeastern United States. For highly migratory (including diadromous) and other estuarine-dependent fish species, a complex hierarchy of management institutions prepares fishery management plans (FMPs), and in some cases habitat plans (e.g. see the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's final Habitat Plan for the South Atlantic Region, October, 1998) for implementation. Management institutions include international (International Council for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) and Congressionally-established councils (New England, Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Councils) and commissions (Atlantic States and Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commissions), as well as federal (National Marine Fisheries Service, Fish and Wildlife Service) and state agencies, state commissions and tribal, regional and local institutions. The management institutions operate within a number of well-defined processes to produce FMPs for single fish, crustacean or coral species, or groups of species. These processes afford an opportunity to address aquatic and even related upland habitat issues affecting the target species. Relatively recent federal (Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, 1993; Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, 1996; National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, 1997) and in some cases state (North Carolina Fisheries Reform Act, 1997), legislation has empowered fishery management institutions to define and designate habitats necessary for the restoration, conservation and maintenance of species which are the target of commercial and recreational fisheries (e.g. Essential Fish Habitat), and in some cases mandates that agencies or institutions proposing projects which could impact such habitats address the impacts. This presentation will briefly review the fishery management institutional structure, several key management processes (interstate fisheries commissions and federal fishery management councils), and suggest strategies for integration of habitat issues into the fishery management process.